

“L’instant décisif”: Henri Cartier-Bresson, work and life

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Biography

Henri Cartier-Bresson was born in August 22 of 1908 in the rural village of Chanteloup, France. He came from a wealthy family of textile manufactures business.

As a teen, Cartier-Bresson was raised with books, specially what we can call “banned literature” to his Catholic-based school. He was really interested on the current philosophies, such as Nietzschean or even Buddhist beliefs. After he became really interested in the Visual Arts from the hand of his uncle, Jean Cottent, an artist at the time; he began painting at the age of 12 first with his uncle, and after, he moved into new painters such as Emile Blanche, this last one introduced him into Surrealism and Cubism.

His parents expected him to enter into an important business school, after failing the test three times he moved on to the plastic arts definitely. After getting his parents’ permission, Cartier-Bresson went to study privately with André Lhote through the years 1927 to 1928; a Cubist artist, who was obsessed with geometry (“geometry is what recovers order to chaos”), factor that will be an influence in Cartier-Bresson’s work (Salerno, Italy, 1933), as he said: “Anarchy is an ethic”. Continuing his artistic formation, Cartier-Bresson went to Cambridge between 1928 to 1929, where he studied Literature and Plastic Arts.

In 1930 he went to Africa for hunting overnight, there he developed some of his first photos there with an old “Brownie” camera, which broke apart due to the mho it got. After falling into a coma due to the blackwater fever (a type of malaria) he went back to France.

He was really influenced by Surrealism and Cubism, specially with the book *Nadja*, from the surrealist author, André Breton, who Cartier-Bresson considered the “king-sun of surrealism”, this book made him adopt the habit to “look at the people, to the world, instead of towards”. Surrealism gave him the idea of “instantaneity”, which will be the main theme of all his work, the “decisive moment”; tough, he never accepted surrealism as a whole, he worked with many surrealist as Luis Buñuel, but in order not to be labeled with surrealism he decided to give it up.

In 1931, he and a friend made a trip through Europe, visiting Germany, Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In 1932 he bought ‘his camera’, a Leica camera which he will use up to the end of his career, in his own words: “I had discovered Leica: it converted into the prolongation of my eye, since it has never left me”. A camera that far from being a really professional camera, it was indeed a ‘normal camera’, “Small and easy to carry”, which allowed him to record the “decisive moment” in time.

The same year he started making photos from France (Place de l'Europe. Gare Saint Lazare, Paris, France, 1932), Italy (Livorno, Tuscany, Italy, 1933) and Spain (Seville, Andalusia, Spain, 1933), being a completely new way of taking photos, portraying Europe's urban and rural underclass. His first exhibition was held on the Ateneo Club, in Madrid in 1933, though, his first important exhibition was held in New York’s Julien Levy Gallery in 1934, which was very criticized at the time, specially for ‘not being professional’, and “anti-graphic photography” because it was done automatically.

Around 1935 he stayed in New York to make some photos with other artists as Walker Evans, or Julien Levy (Downtown, Manhattan, NY, USA, 1947). Around 1936 he started a

filmmaking, up to doing a documentary in 1937 about the medical relief program of the Loyalist fighters in the Spanish civil war, where he would probably have met Robert Capa.

Even if Cartier-Bresson never was an avowed communist, he developed a leftist sympathy. He found a job in the French communist daily, *Ce Soir*, and following his beliefs of shooting to the people, he captured memorable pictures of worker-class British, who were crowing George's VI coronation (Coronation of George IV, London, England, 1938). At *Ce Soir*, he met other photojournalists as Robert Capa or David Seymour aka “Chim”.

In 1939, after the World War II outbreak, Cartier-Bresson enlisted into the French army for its photo and film unit. He was captured in 1940 by the Germans and carried to a Prisoners of War Camp, after trying to escape twice, at the third try he managed to escape with some other POW's and go back to Paris, still in German occupation. Once there, he and other photojournalists organized secret photography units to document the German occupation, because this, in 1947, after the war, the US Army asked him to make a documentary, that will reveal all his career to the world, in his debut on the MOMA of New York.

Back in France, still in 1947, Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, and Seymour along with other three photographers created their cooperative: the Magnum Photos, in which they will share all the benefits equally, including Cartier-Bresson's first book *Images à la Sauvette*, or *The Decisive Moment*, where he explains the “decisive moment”.

During the 50's his leftist sympathy allowed him to enter to the URSS and China, where Mao Tse-tung was making the revolution, indeed he was making photos of Beijing a day before Mao entered (*The last days of Kuomintang*, Beijing, 1949), moreover from Moscow and the Berlin's Wall.

At the end of his career he made several portraits of famous people at the time, such as Truman Capote, then he retired: “Sometimes when I was walking in the street I see something interesting and I say to myself: ‘That could be a nice picture’”

He died in August 2 of 2004 at the age of 95; Cartier-Bresson was usually celebrated as “the greatest photographer in photography history” and with a “huge importance”.

Some of the most important exhibitions of Cartier-Bresson are:

- *D'une Chine à l'autre*, 1954.
- *Les Européens*, 1955.
- *Moscou*, 1955.
- *Flagrants Délits*, 1968.
- *Vive la France*, 1970.
- *The face of Asia*, 1972.

The decisive moment

Exposed on *The Decisive Moment* in 1952, book from Henri Cartier-Bresson, in which he explains how is his way of taking his photos. Summarizing Cartier-Bresson says that has to be automatic, tough not done randomly, the key of the decisive moment it's without a doubt, **the precise instant to take the photo, in which every object will match perfectly capturing the essence of the scene.**

The idea describes that to make a picture, the photographer has to know at what time he should take it; it comes from the surrealistic ideas of automaticity, in his own words: “We try not to fire a burst of photos, shooting quickly and mechanically, in order not to overload ourselves with useless drafts that disgust the memory and prejudice the sharpness of the whole (scene / essence)”.

Indeed Cartier-Bresson always said that he never cared about the technical part, he just cared about the final result, in his words: “When I first started I used to do everything myself, including revealing, I was so excited about the final result that I never saw hoe these were over or underexposed due the chemicals, I only cared if the photo came out as I wanted to”.

For the composition he says, that has to be done at the right time, in the viewfinder has to create a precise geometry on the fly, here is where we see André Lhote Cubism influence in Cartier-Bresson.

He also refers to the right timing for the photo to “capture the essence of one scene”, an essence that in most of the cases vanishes, “play with the things that disappear, that they are impossible to revive”, and since each of the photos are a moment that will not come back again, he says that we cannot make a theme, “tough, we can make a selection of images for the representation of the reportage”.

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